

On Equality and Persons

In the essay which follows, of which this is also a part, I would like to consider equality, because equality is something very important. All persons are equal. Of course, there is some discussion of precisely what a “person” is. I consider humans and animals, and then the issue of abortion briefly.

Let us consider persons. Human beings will suit our definition of persons for now, but we will come back to this later. All persons are equal. This seems obvious to me. Now, I am aware of the over-used objection to this, that is, that we are not equal in many ways. We are not all equally strong, or equally tall, or capable of doing an equal amount of work, or equally beautiful, etc. And we certainly all differ greatly in our personalities. Yes, indeed we do.

I fail to see what this argument, if it is deserving of such as title, is attempting to establish. Because people are different does not mean they are not equal. I do not recall saying all people were identical with one another. Nay, people are not even identical with themselves over time. Equality is measured in terms of worth, of value. And all people have equal worth and equal value. There is no person who is inferior to any other person, ever. As Hobbes said in *Leviathan*, despite our physical differences, the smallest weakest person could kill the strongest, so the physical differences argument is no basis for justifying inequality.

Let us consider an example: on one hand we have the Queen of England. On the other we have a thug, a criminal, who has been convicted (and has openly admitted to) dozens of cases of murder, assault, rape, robbery, etc. Simply because we are not terribly fond of the actions of the second person does not mean they are of lesser intrinsic value. Anyone who disagrees would probably be an unpleasant sort of person who puts less value on people they don't like, thinking that their disliking of this person depletes the worth of that person's life. This is obviously untrue. If you do not see that this is untrue, there is probably no need for you to continue reading. You may leave.

I would like to think that if I was in a situation wherein I was able to save only the Queen or only the criminal (let's call him Clemington) I would not allow their positions in society affect my decision. Or, if I were to allow it to affect my decision of who I should save, it would be in the opposite way from that which you may expect. Clemington perhaps is more deserving of life because he has had a bad life, and should be allowed more time to try to achieve happiness. Of course, the committing of crimes does not make him unhappy, but living in jail for many years might do. This matters not. What I am saying is: The Queen is a celebrity, and lives a very comfortable life. As such, she has little left to want, whereas the criminal probably has a lot left to want. I would probably be quicker to save the life of an ordinary person than a rich celebrity any day. However, this is irrelevant to our present inquiry. The point I wish to make is that all people are equal, regardless of who I would save first!

Before I continue: it should be obvious that the equality of persons has implications for things like politics, distribution of wealth, etc. This is indeed so, but shall be discussed in a different essay. Suffice it to say for now, that it seems clear that if each person is equal to every other person, no one should be allowed to rule over others, or tell them what to do, and it is also clear that no one should possess vast fortunes whilst others starve. My proposed solutions for these problems will be discussed in another essay, but, having just considered equality; it is of obvious importance that we at least must realise that if everyone is equal, the society we live in must be changed drastically.

Where are we now? I think perhaps we may leave equality as an issue in and of itself, and consider how far this equality stretches. What are persons? There are a number of criteria for defining persons. Exactly what is on the list matters little. Some of the obvious factors include: having a concept of language; having an idea of the self, and understanding what that is; understanding past, present and future insofar as you are capable of appreciating and the order of events and may notice patterns; being able to think rationally; possessing the ability to put others before yourself; etc. You may agree, or, you may disagree. This is unimportant. The point I wish to make from this is that, as discussed by Peter Singer in *Practical Ethics*, being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* is not what makes you a person.

Some of what I say in the remainder of this short essay will relate to what Singer says on the matter. However, I will not be following a Utilitarian method as he does.

Animals: are they persons? Most people think not. This is what Singer calls Speciesism. That is, if your reasons for thinking not are simply because they are not human beings. Obviously, this is irrelevant. This is akin to racism. Equality means no discrimination of any kind ever, so far as is obvious to me.

Singer is not in favour of animal rights, merely animal status. He thinks that an animal, if it has an interest, should have its interests taken as equal to those of humans. This seems fair enough. Some animals, such as higher mammals, are capable of doing some of the things we would consider factors of personness. There are examples of this, including some given by Singer. I shall not mention them in this essay. What matters to me is that some animals are persons; animals which are capable of wanting to live, for example. But surely all animals want to live? If I swing an axe at a chicken, I suspect it might try to avoid being hit. Maybe it wouldn't though, I have not attempted this. It matters not.

What is entirely obvious is that humans are animals. We are nothing more than animals. So, why should we have a higher value than other animals? We should not. I cannot think of any reason why we are more important than other animals. In fact, it is completely laughable and ridiculous that we think we are special, that we distance ourselves from animals, that we build cities, that we use electricity, and that we fly to the moon. This is absurd. I am not undermining our achievements as a species. But it is simply stupid that we live in this artificial world apart from animals, that we keep them in zoos and such, and that we use them for our own ends. I wish to clarify that last one. I have no problem with the eating of meat. In an ideal world, perhaps we would not, but I'm not certain this is true. We are animals, animals eat each other, therefore, we eat other animals. Now, I know you may have just cringed at my use of the argument from nature. Just because something is natural does not mean it is good or right. Well, whether or not it is morally right is irrelevant- moral subjectivism becomes a problem here of course, but aside from that, I just do not think it is a moral issue. The eating of meat is something many animals, including humans, have always done to survive. Now, it is not essential for our survival any more. But this doesn't mean it is bad. I am uncertain of my conclusion on this question. I'm not sure there is anything wrong with eating animals, but I see that it would probably be better if we did not. What I meant by using them for our own ends is that we should not own them. This is slavery, plain and simple. And if all persons are equal, then slavery is wrong.

But are all animals persons? Well, as I've suggested, some are. But is this sufficient to say all are? No. But, I think that the fact that we are but animals ourselves changes things. If we are only animals, we are of no more value than any other animal. Therefore, I think we can consider all animals as being equal to us. This seems obvious to me. Some, such as Jeremy Bentham, have suggested that keeping animals as slaves is no different to keeping black people as slaves, and I am inclined to agree. Bentham's reason was that they can suffer. This seems like a good reason, but I don't think it is even necessary- the equal intrinsic value of all animals is enough. But alas I am a hypocrite. For I would rather a spider be killed than be in the same room as me. But, this is also a natural instinct I suppose. If an animal feels threatened by another animal, and if it possesses the ability to destroy the scary animal, it would do so. Does that make it ok? I am unsure. But my fear of spiders prevents me from changing my mind on this issue. Perhaps it takes a more open-minded person than me to grant full equality to all animals.

"What about plants?", I hear you ask. Well, this is a difficult question to answer. Surely all living things are of equal value. They are. Bentham would be able to say that plants do not suffer, so we may kill them, but I have not allowed myself this option. It seems impractical to avoid walking on grass because it is equal to you. Maybe I could say that equality does not mean we cannot kill. But then you could also say that equality does not mean we cannot keep slaves, for example. According to my moral system, I think it is wrong to cause suffering to anything, including animals. Maybe Bentham was right in using suffering as a criterion. But what is suffering? Surely all animals writhe in pain when you chop bits off. Plants don't though, but then, plants work differently than animals. That we do not see them writhe in pain is not enough to warrant killing them. I do not know what to conclude here. Perhaps it must be left down to the individual's moral code, but then I already suggested that this was not even a moral issue at all. Eating doesn't seem to be, but perhaps other killing is. Certainly, killing for no reason seems obviously bad. To be honest, I think plants just do their own thing. They do not care if we own them. Maybe this is what matters. But then some animals

also do not care. Maybe lower animals must not be included then. I do not know, and I will not continue rambling on this point.

My next point is this: humans are silly to keep animals in zoos and such, as I've already said. It seems obvious to me that animals should be free. They must be allowed to roam the streets of our towns and cities at will. Most would probably wish to stay in the wild anyway though. But the deliberate human action of separating ourselves from animals should end. You may complain when a wild animal destroys your child, say. Well, your child probably eats meat, so it's fair game to me. It is no different than when a murderer kills someone. I do not like killing, but it seems strange to say that we must keep animals away from us in case they kill us when we obviously should not do this with people. You may say: well, we put people in jail. This is true, but we do not do this before they have killed someone. Furthermore, I am against punishing others for their actions anyway. Moral subjectivism makes it so.

Finally, I shall very briefly consider the important issue of abortion. This is because, using the criteria for personness, it is clear that fetuses are not persons. In fact, Singer suggests that even live babies are not persons. A fetus before birth, and a baby after, are not significantly different. Here's an example: say, a baby is born very prematurely, and a fetus is much later than expected. The fetus is actually more developed than the baby, so why should the baby have more rights, just because it happens to have been born. This seems a fair assessment, but I would still say we shouldn't kill them, simply because there is no reason to do so. Generally, it seems a good idea to simply not kill anything when possible.

Without going into any religious or scientific factors, I will simply say that abortion must be allowed for two reasons: the first is that the mother owns her body, and has the right to do with it as she wishes. So far as I can see, this ends the discussion. The second reason is that the fetus is not a person. This should give some consolation to mothers worried about the abortion, but it alone is not a sufficient reason. Babies are also not persons, but I would be against killing live born babies because they are not in your body, and so you have no right to kill them. A fetus is within you, it is a part of you, and no one can force you to do something with your body. This is an issue of freedom probably: no one can tell you what to do. If you are a mother, the decision is yours entirely (though perhaps the father should be consulted?). Making abortion illegal is simply infringing on your rights to do what you wish to do, but freedoms and rights are not the issue in this essay, with the exception of saying that if everyone is equal no one can tell you what to do. Suffice it to say for now that fetuses are not persons.

To conclude, I considered equality, and I considered persons. I said that all persons were equal, and I extended this to animals. But I ran into some problems with lower animals, and with plants. I was unable to make a conclusion on that topic. I also suggested that we should not separate ourselves from other animals, because doing so seems very odd indeed. Looking at things from a neutral perspective, humans must seem very strange to have set themselves apart from other animals, and to live in cities and such. I'm not saying we are wrong to live in cities and walk on two legs and use mobile phones and drive cars, etc. But I am suggesting we are wrong to prevent animals from roaming freely. Here is an example: a cat is using my garden as a toilet. Should I be upset? Probably not. Now, I could just chase the cat away anyway since it can always use somewhere else as a toilet, but I should at least be aware of the fact that it is only my garden in the human world. In the world of other living things, this would make no sense. It is simply some grass. Finally, I considered the issue of abortion, and concluded that it is perfectly acceptable because an unborn baby is not actually a person, and, strictly speaking, nor is a live baby. Of course, the justification that the fetus is within you is lost when a live baby is considered.

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